

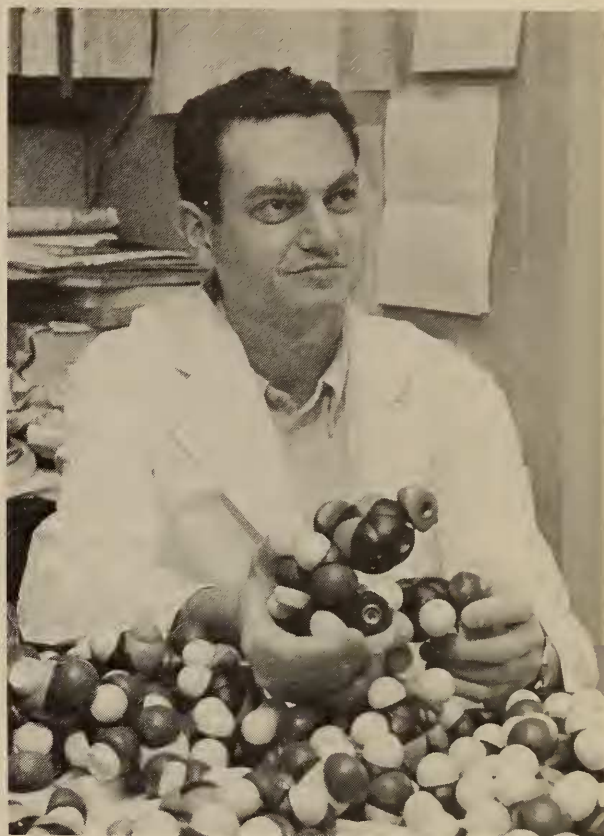
Marshall W. Nirenberg, Nobelist

On the morning of October 16, 1968, Marshall Nirenberg was in his laboratory at the National Institutes of Health as usual. He received a totally unexpected telephone call informing him that he had been selected to receive one-third of the 1968 Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine. The members of his staff were quickly informed and gathered in his office for a family celebration. Later in the day there was a large press conference in Building 31, which led to public announcements and stories in the newspapers.

This news came as no surprise to the members of the Washington Academy of Sciences who had read about Nirenberg in their *Journal* in March 1962; or who had attended a meeting of the Academy on May 17, 1962, at which he spoke; or who were present at the annual dinner meeting of the Academy on February 21, 1963, at which he received the annual award of the Academy in the biological sciences.

Although few members of the Academy at that time could have fully appreciated the significance of Nirenberg's research, it must have been clear to all that he had done something extraordinary when he succeeded in synthesizing protein in a cell-free system, in proving that synthetic ribonucleic acid (RNA) would stimulate such syntheses, and in demonstrating that a synthetic RNA of a relatively simple structure would synthesize a certain relatively simple protein.

The basic advances just mentioned had already been made when I visited Nirenberg in his laboratory at NIH on February 5, 1962. The resulting *Brownstone Tower*, beginning on page 69 of the March 1962 issue of the *Journal*, was not the first popular account of his work, which



began at NIH in 1959, but it led to his early recognition by the Academy and to his membership in it. Thus the Academy is elevated by his distinction.

My meeting with Nirenberg in 1962 was not prompted by my prescience in genetics or biochemistry, in which I was and still am poorly informed; it resulted from information available to me as executive secretary of the Division of Biology and Agriculture, National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council. In 1961 the United States Steel Foundation wished to establish an award in molecular biology to be presented annually by the National Academy to the nominee of its special committee on the award. I knew that Nirenberg was the choice of the committee for the first presentation of this new award in April 1962 and therefore visited him as